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Man Who Says He Once Served C.I.A. Asserts Post Office Helped Agency Open Mail

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By EVERETT R. HOLLES
Special to The New York Times

SAN DIEGO, Jan. 7—A man who identifies himself as a former official of the Central Intelligence Agency said today that when he resigned in 1959 the Post Office Department was covertly assisting the C.I.A. in intercepting and copying the mail of American citizens.

Dr. Melvin Crain, 53 years old, a professor of political science at San Diego State University, said C.I.A. officials involved in the "mail tapping" acknowledged to him that it was an illegal and unconstitutional invasion of privacy and in violation of the National Security Act of 1947, which created the intelligence agency.

He said his colleagues justified the operation, however, as being necessary to "achieve our mission" of safeguarding American security against the Soviet Union.

A spokesman for the Postal Service in Washington, Jamison Cain, denied that the service "has ever or is now" involved in opening the private mail of American citizens. First-class mail may be opened only by court order, usually in criminal cases, and this occurs only on rare occasions, he said.

The Summer of 1958

The only exceptions are opening sealed mail to search for an address for delivery or if the opening is specifically approved by the addressee.

Federal law on "obstruction of correspondence" set a maximum penalty of \$2,000 in fines and five years in prison for "whoever takes any letter . . . to pry into the business or secrets of another, or opens . . . the same."

The Post Office's alleged screening of letters written by Americans, mostly to relatives



The New York Times
Dr. Melvin Crain

or friends in Russia, was said to have started in the summer of 1958 during the second term of the Eisenhower Administration when the late Arthur E. Summerfield was Postmaster General.

According to Dr. Crain's account, the Post Office Department set up areas in post offices in New York and New Orleans, staffed by specially cleared personnel, where sophisticated equipment was used to open copy and reseal letters from Americans about whom the C.I.A. sought information.

"The surreptitious opening of U.S. mail was the last straw for me," said Dr. Crain, who resigned from the C.I.A. in June, 1959, seven months after he said he first learned of the mail surveillance carried out in extraordinary secrecy under an

arrangement among the C.I.A., the Post Office Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

A C.I.A. spokesman in Washington declined to comment on whether Dr. Crain had ever worked for the agency or on whether such mail opening was carried out.

The spokesman said that the C.I.A. was "not very forthcoming" about naming employees or former employees, and pointed out that the matter of possible domestic operations was under review by a commission appointed by President Ford.

Dr. Crain, who joined the C.I.A. in September, 1951, said the agency gave him a "staff D" clearance—a supersensitive security clearance—in November, 1958, that made him aware of the highly secret mail interceptions. Thereafter, he said his office read about six intercepted letters from Americans each day.

Letter From a Student

The equipment used in the New York and New Orleans post offices, according to Dr. Crain, enabled the C.I.A. to open, copy, reseal letters and send them on their way without any tell-tale signs of tampering. A similar mail surveillance unit was operated by the Washington headquarters of the F.B.I., he added.

Most of the letters were in English, to friends and relatives in the Soviet Union, Dr. Crain said, and he could recall no instance where "positive use" was made of any information contained in the intercepted mail. One purpose of the surveillance, he said, was to develop contacts with Americans who had acquaintances in Russia.

"This was often a method for recruiting C.I.A. operatives," he said.

He said he kept one of the in-

tercepted letters, written on Nov. 16, 1958, by an Amherst College student, apparently connected with the school newspaper, mailed the following day from Amherst, Mass., and opened and copied on Nov. 19 before being forwarded on to Moscow. The letter, he said, sought to arrange for a shipment of 1,000 copies of the college newspaper to the Moscow Committee of Youth Organizations.

"We were, in effect, building dossiers on these people," the former C.I.A. employee said.

He said an official at a "Staff D" briefing he boasted that letters could be opened, copied and sent on to their destination so quickly that "the normal flow of the mail was not disturbed" at the New York and New Orleans post offices.

Dr. Crain said he had carried his complaint to his superior, Richard M. Bissell Jr., deputy director of the C.I.A.'s office of plans, "who said he was surprised and shocked and would take steps to end the mail surveillance, but nothing happened."

Mr. Bissell, who was in charge of planning for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba for the C.I.A., left the agency in 1962. His office in Hartford reported late today that he was "in transit" to his home in East Hartford. Telephone calls there went unanswered.

Dr. Crain said that in May, 1959, in defiance of C.I.A. regulations, he went outside the agency and consulted Dean Acheson, then in private law practice in Washington after serving as Secretary of State in the Truman Administration.

He went to Mr. Acheson, he said, because the former Secretary of State was "one of my heroes" and he believed Mr. Acheson had extensive in-

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